

# AT THE INTERSECTION OF DIRECT AND HEALTHY

*Public health officials and farm advocates promote food access programs at farmers markets to support farms and low-income shoppers*

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Public health officials want you to eat your fruits and vegetables. And now, with the help of farmers markets, they want you to eat your *local, direct marketed* fruits and vegetables. More specifically, enabling low-income shoppers to spend their federal nutrition assistance benefits at farmers markets and other farm-direct venues has become a policy priority. In addition to reducing diet-related health issues, these programs aim to increase local farmers' sales. As such, public health and local farm advocates have joined forces to successfully position "food access" programs as a win-win.

Nuancing the issues of hunger and food insecurity, the term "food access" highlights the reality that many people face financial and physical barriers when shopping for healthy foods. Farmers markets, which transform parking lots and city streets into vibrant local foods trading posts, are widely considered key assets and active partners in strategies to improve food access. The two major public food access programs at Washington's farmers markets are the Farmers Market Nutrition Program or "FMNP" and the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (formerly known as food stamps) or "SNAP" (SNAP is also referred to as "Basic Food" in Washington state).

In 2014, 126 Washington farmers markets, 579 farmers and 71 farm stands were authorized to participate in FMNP programs supporting low-income shoppers. Total FMNP sales were in excess of \$1.2 million—85% at farmers markets—and benefited an estimated 44,740 people (Donovan et al., 2015). Through WIC FMNP, low-income women and children in the Department of Health's Women, Infants and Children (WIC) program receive \$20 per person to buy eligible products from authorized farmers at authorized farmers markets or farm stands. Through the Department of Social and Health Services, Senior FMNP provides low-income seniors with \$40 per season to buy directly from authorized farms at farmers markets or stands.

In Washington state, SNAP started in 1939 as an anti-hunger program. Today, it reaches more than one million Washingtonians a month by providing an average of \$117 per month to buy any food for home consumption from authorized SNAP retailers. When these benefits transitioned from paper checks to Electronic Benefit Transfer (EBT) cards in the late 1990s, SNAP sales at farmers markets dropped dramatically because outdoor, seasonal farmers markets didn't have the phone lines, electricity, and accounting tools to process them. When wireless card service terminals became available in the early 2000s, the Washington State Farmers Market Association, Department of Health,

Department of Social and Human Services, alongside anti-hunger advocates and city leaders began their work to address the morass of infrastructure, policy, technology, funding, and market capacity challenges to accepting SNAP EBT at farmers markets. By 2014, there were 74 farmers markets accepting SNAP EBT in Washington with total sales of over \$426,000 (Donovan et al. 2015). The number of farmers benefiting from SNAP sales in Washington is not currently tracked.

Despite the significant investment in ensuring that SNAP EBT benefits can be used at farmers markets, FMNP remains a far more significant program in terms of sales. In 2014, FMNP represented two and a half times as many sales as SNAP at farmers markets in Washington. The average FMNP sales per farmers market in 2014 were \$8,385 compared to the average SNAP sales of \$5,760 per market (Donovan et al. 2015).



Photo credit: Colleen Donovan

Through FMNP, low-income shoppers can buy certified organic produce at farmers markets from producers like Aly Parigrew of Yonder Farms at the Okanogan Valley Farmers Market. Statewide food access programs at farmers markets generated \$1.48 million or 4% of reported sales in 2014.

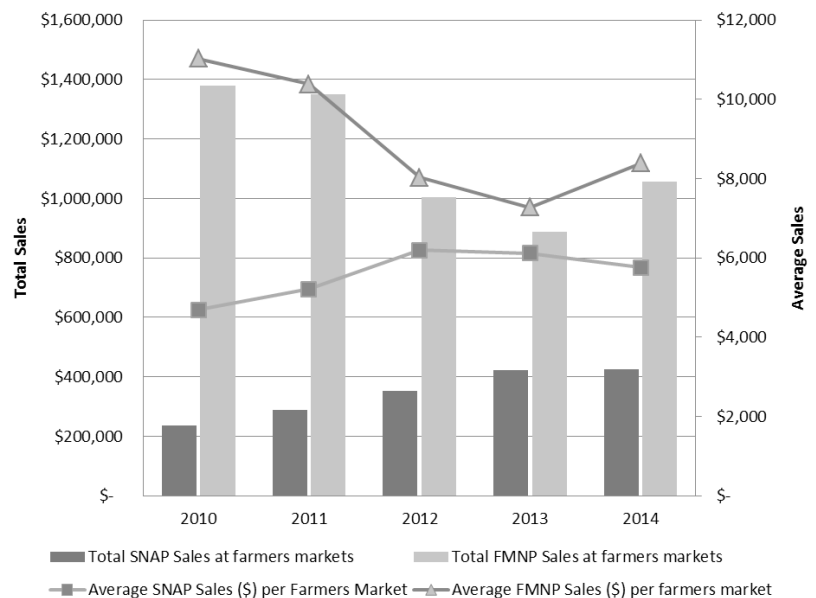
So, why is there so much effort being invested into SNAP at farmers markets? First, the overall farmers market sales through the FMNP program have decreased 23% in the last five years, whereas the SNAP sales have increased 82% in the same period. This is due in part to the complexities of how each program is funded. Second, by design, 100% of the FMNP funding is used at farmers markets or farm stands on a defined set of products: fresh fruits, vegetables, herbs, and, with Senior FMNP, honey. In contrast, farmers markets only account for 0.027% of the SNAP sales in Washington (Donovan et al. 2015). Therefore, in theory, the potential for growth in SNAP sales at farmers markets is potentially far greater. Even if 1% of the over \$1.5 billion spent by Washington's SNAP participants each year were spent at farmers markets it would represent \$1.5 million in sales. Furthermore, SNAP can be spent on "any food for home consumption" meaning that more meat, dairy, value-added, and other vendors are able to benefit from these sales. And, thirdly, FMNP checks must be spent between June and October, whereas SNAP benefits can be spent year-round which can help farms with early and late season crops, as well as year-round and winter markets.

For both the FMNP and SNAP programs, the overall trends and modest average per market sales at farmers markets are only part of the food access story. If we look at FMNP and SNAP sales by market, a very different picture emerges. There are a subset of around 18 farmers markets that are "high performing food access" markets with sales of \$20,000 to \$40,000 in FMNP and \$10,000 to over \$35,000 in SNAP (Donovan et al. 2015). For these markets, their vendors, and their shoppers, these food access programs are quantitatively more impactful. (Farmers sometimes refer to them as "WIC markets.") Further research is needed to determine the characteristics of these high performing food access markets. Serving low-income shoppers is important to most (70%) of farmers markets and improving the community's "access to farm fresh produce" or "healthy foods" was the primary reason for starting a third of Washington's farmers markets (Ostrom and Donovan, 2013). This intent needs to be paired with food access sales to identify the "high performing food access" markets so that public agencies can use their scarce resources to effectively work with a subgroup of farmers markets rather than presuming all markets—even those with modest sales—should be shouldering the workload of managing and promoting SNAP and FMNP programs. It may be more sustainable for local nonprofits, service organizations, or even churches with an anti-hunger mission to take on these food access programs for some markets.

Experienced farmers market farmers are adept at juggling the "multiple currencies" accepted at farmers markets, including FMNP checks, SNAP tokens, and now "Fresh Bucks" and other matching programs designed to attract low-income shoppers (Kinney and Donovan, 2016). According to survey results, farmers report that the civic desire of enabling low-income shoppers to shop from them is even more important than the personal

economic benefit of increasing their farmers market sales (Ostrom, Donovan, and Goldberger, forthcoming). To the degree food access programs at farmers markets maintain their dual goals of supporting public health strategies and increasing direct farm sales, farmers may also benefit from better understanding the nature of the "high performing food access" markets so that they could adapt their products, pricing, and sales strategies.

### SNAP and FMNP Sales in Washington State, 2010 to 2014



For now, farmers may consider asking the market manager what their annual FMNP or SNAP sales are in order to know what kind of sales to expect from shoppers. The public health and economic justice issues driving food access programs at farmers markets are ongoing challenges. As our experience and understanding of where and how to invest in food access programs evolves, so too will the intersections of direct marketing and healthy eating for all.

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### References

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